

February 26, 2004

## **Schools Working with Domestic Violence Agencies and Homeless Students**

Student safety is the first consideration for schools when working with homeless children and youth in domestic violence situations. At the same time schools should avoid actions, taken on behalf of a student, which might further disempower a parent living with domestic violence. Federal and state non-disclosure laws prohibit domestic violence agencies from providing personal client information to other agencies. However, a parent can sign a release allowing information about their child(ren) to be shared with school districts.

Along with other requirements under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, all Wisconsin school districts have new responsibilities under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, NCLB), including the designation of a local district homeless liaison. School district homeless liaisons and domestic violence agencies can do a wide variety of activities to help ensure the safety of homeless children and youth in domestic violence situations while enhancing their learning environment.

The district's homeless liaison should contact the domestic violence agency/shelter in their community to establish a working relationship with the agency. Developing working relationships between schools and domestic violence agencies will expedite educational services for homeless students staying at shelters, transitional housing, or living under other emergency arrangements.

It would be helpful for **school districts** to provide the following services:

1. Meet with a parent considering enrolling her/his child(ren) in a local school to discuss educational program options and the safety concerns the parent may have.
2. A safety process should be established and communicated to all appropriate school staff for any student when a court order prohibiting contact and release of information to the noncustodial parent is obtained.
3. The homeless liaison can maintain some control over confidentiality issues involving the homeless child(ren) or youth by holding private meetings with affected school staff to discuss the confidentiality concerns of the parent.
4. **Any assistance school personnel can offer to help parents achieve a safe environment for their child(ren) is very important.** District staff could offer to help the parent make arrangements to have the child(ren) attend school in another school district if that is the wish of the parent. Staff may have to investigate different transportation alternatives to help the parent. (Please note that under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, it is not the responsibility of the district to provide transportation to the school selected by the parent if the school selected is not the child(ren)'s school of origin.)
5. The district's homeless liaison, Title I Coordinator, teachers, and domestic abuse agency representatives could collaboratively plan and provide appropriate academic and support

services to address the needs of homeless students during the hours they attend school, and additionally as needed, to remove any barriers to learning they are encountering in their non-school hours.

6. Be proactive in informing a parent that school directory data can remain private [Wis. Stat. §118.125 (2)(j)(2)] if the parent indicates so in writing. It is important to clearly communicate with the parent that both parents have the legal right to access to their child(ren)'s school records [Wis. Stat. §118.125 (2)(a)] unless a court order has been issued limiting the access of one of the parents. District staff should have the appropriate form readily available when homeless parents/guardians register their child for school.
7. Arrange for a tour of the school to help both the parent and child(ren) feel more comfortable about attending school. The liaison could also establish some kind of “buddy system” or establish a “first friends club” to increase the acceptance of new students. The school may have a program with a peer support component the homeless student could use.
8. Have school supplies available for homeless children and youth.
9. Proactively extend eligibility for free lunch programs under new U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines. See DPI school nutrition bulletin *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) September 2002*, Q#26, or <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dfm/fns/fincou1.html>.
10. Encourage the meaningful participation of the homeless parent with the educational programs of the child(ren).
11. Enroll the homeless child or youth in academic enrichment programs, such as tutoring, before and after school programs, community learning centers, early childhood education, and summer programs, as appropriate.
12. Ensure that the homeless liaison and other school staff are knowledgeable of and sensitive to the issues facing families experiencing domestic violence. Establish professional development and student programs on the topic of homelessness and violence to increase awareness and develop conflict resolution strategies around these issues.
13. Establish periodic meetings between school and shelter staff to discuss the role each agency plays in helping children become academically successful.
14. District pupil services staff, the homeless liaison, or other appropriate school personnel can periodically “check in” with the homeless student to assess how well the student is adjusting to the new school environment.

It would be helpful for the **domestic violence agency** to provide the following services:

1. Share information with the parent about local school enrollment during the client intake process. Part of this discussion can include making the parent aware that directory data at the school may be kept confidential if the parent informs the school in writing.
2. Encourage both the parent and child(ren) to meet with the homeless liaison or other school staff, when necessary, to discuss their concerns regarding school attendance or other school issues.

3. Encourage a parent who has concerns about the safety of their child(ren) attending school to apply for a court order restricting the contact of a parent or other individuals that may pose a threat, if this would be a workable strategy.
4. Encourage the meaningful participation of the parent in their child(ren)'s educational programs, when appropriate.
5. Offer to help the parent, child(ren), and/or youth understand and develop strategies to address the experience of homelessness and violence in their lives.
6. When appropriate, refer clients to other community services.
7. Establish periodic meetings between school and domestic violence program staff to discuss and clarify the role each agency plays in helping homeless children and youth become academically successful.
8. Offer training to school staff on the topic of domestic violence and the effects of violence on parents, children and youth.

Contact Mary Maronek, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Coordinator, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, 125 S. Webster Street, Madison, WI, 53707, (608) 261-6322, or [mary.maronek@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:mary.maronek@dpi.wi.gov) for more information about homeless issues.

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